

CHAPTER ONE



I bore no chains or shackles, but I was a prisoner all the same.

My will was not my own as I approached the villa under the cover of darkness. The Bond between the Conqueror King and me, or rather the leash he held on my soul, urged me on as snow crunched beneath my worn leather boots.

By now, the party would be in full swing. Guests would be too full of drink to notice what lurked in the shadows. Their host was too distracted to notice an uninvited guest.

Snowflakes clung to my lashes like fresh morning dew as I navigated the grounds, not caring about the trails of footprints left in my wake. The ongoing storm would erase them by morning. I longed to retreat to the warmth of my bedchambers, but my wants were irrelevant. They always were. There was no use in fighting against the Bond—I couldn't leave until my task was completed.

I had one objective tonight as the king's Informer: find and gather evidence against Lord Byrne.

The lord's multicolored brick house stood tall and wide compared to the other homes within sight. I clung to the side of the building, careful to keep away from the light casting from the windows.

Based on the map the Lord Chancellor gave me, I passed the foyer and greeting rooms, now empty aside from the occasional servant. The

level above contained the party itself, as indicated by the guests who stood near the windows—the third level housed Lord Byrne’s office.

Creeping toward the back gardens, I searched for the ladder tThe chancellor assured that it would be placed next to the terrace, allowing me to reach the third floor unseen. Lord Byrne had been marked for death once the chancellor caught wind of his possible involvement in smuggling magic wielders out of Centra. The lord was too prominent to kill on the spot without question. Too human not to give him the benefit of the doubt. And so, I was sent to confirm his suspicions.

If Lord Byrne was indeed smuggling osnádúrtha out of Centra and the Bond forced me to bring back the evidence, it would mean betraying my own kind. Again.

I suppressed a groan when the terrace came into view with *no. Bleeding Ladder*. There would have been some satisfaction that the chancellor wasn’t as omniscient as he claimed if I weren’t stuck in the biting cold looking for alternatives. I held up an obscene gesture to the rotted lattice, wondering if *this* was his idea of a ladder. Yeah, right. As soon as both feet were off the ground, I would come crashing down in a cascade of miserable glory, alerting everyone inside.

I cursed the chancellor for good measure. Of course, he wouldn’t make it easy on me.

Puffs of hot air escaped into the night under my grumbled mutterings as I prowled the grounds. An unmarked door appeared a few paces away, and I almost kissed it. Almost. My ear pressed against the frost-tinged door, waiting, not needing to strain as my faie hearing could detect even the faintest of noises. Silence. This time, I kissed it.

The door opened up to what must have been the servant’s stairwell. I toed the first step, testing for creaks before sneaking up the stairs. Echoes of hurried footsteps stopped my ascent. Moments later, the door to the second floor swung open and shut. I sucked in a breath, pulling the shadows closer to my hiding place, and pressed into the wall. A servant carrying a lantern rushed past. The lantern’s light ricocheted off the stone, running right past me. Oblivious, the servant disappeared down the steps—the light with him. My heart raced despite knowing he didn’t see me. He couldn’t have, not unless he looked closer. But no one ever looked closer. Not with my magic concealing me.

The shadows didn’t have a voice or a conscious thought, but they comforted and protected me all the same. Alive underneath the surface of my skin and identical in color to the silver of my hair, they were always

with me. I never questioned why my features were tinged with silver when the shadows calling to me were deprived of light. If I wished, my silver swirls could pull from the surrounding shadows, claiming them as mine and shrouding me in darkness—a handy trick as a spy, but only useful if shadows were present.

Useful enough to become one of the king's Bonded.

The shadows might have camouflaged me, but they did nothing to conceal noise. I continued on near-silent feet. Muffled music buzzed through the walls with excitement as I traveled up the staircase. When I reached the third floor, I slipped into the dim hallway and let the door snick shut like a secret—quiet and just between the two of us.

The harmonies of the string quartet were louder here. Rising and falling. Reaching out, beckoning me forward. I squeezed my eyes shut, giving myself a moment to enjoy. The pluck of the strings thrummed in my veins, imploring me to move along with it. I'd never danced before, not formally. Not like the lords and ladies did below. But there was something magical about how music moved through the body, as if it was begging it to sway this way and that.

I fell victim to the music's pull. It was the only thing I enjoyed about living at the castle, and it was rare I was allowed within earshot, forced to listen through layers of stone. My stride quickened like the staccato of the violins, carrying me past the most exposed section of the third floor overlooking the lower level. Crouching, I concealed myself in the shadows and looked through the banisters, attempting a glimpse of the musicians. One of the marble pillars obstructed the band, but the scent of roasted boar wafted up the stairs. My stomach growled.

Below, members of high society preened to one another in the comfort of warmth as the party raged on. Indulging in gourmet foods and premium spirits, guests boasted about their wealth and successes. Most of them found their fortune on the backs of the *osnádúrtha*. When magic-wielders were stripped of their homes, their wealth, and their lives, the king dispersed everything to those he favored. Shops. Farms. Homes. Anything the *osnádúrtha* once called their own.

Centra was once peaceful and home to many magic wielders who roamed freely. Sixteen years ago, everything changed. A human king declared magic as the cause of the kingdom's ailments and the overabundance of *osnádúrtha* as an affront to the gods. His reign of killing, enslavement, and exploitation began—the Reckoning for our people. It shouldn't have been possible, but here we were. Those whose magic was

useful were kept and later Bound to the Conqueror King, forced to do his bidding. Those who somehow managed to slip the king's grasp went into hiding with the hopes of fleeing the kingdom. Between paper checks, high ticket prices for ships, and the closure of Ilythia's border, an osnádúrtha's only chance of making it out of Centra alive was with the help of the smugglers.

Guests marveled at the osnádúrtha in the center of the room—faie by the looks of him, his pointed ears giving him away. The water wielder's fingers swayed in a rhythm known only to him as his magic manipulated the liquid from surrounding glasses to form scenes of galloping horses and flying birds. Nothing more than senseless party tricks. Was this what his life had been reduced to? Someone who used their gods' gift as entertainment for their oppressors? Still, it was a better fate than most.

Lord Byrne sat on a plush settee along the windowless back wall under his coat of arms: a shield surrounded by smaller symbols. As host, he held the attention of Crown Prince Ronan of Centra across from him. The prince sat with regal grace, his back as straight as one of Lord Byrne's marble pillars. Not a hair out of place on his blonde bun or a blemish on his pale skin, Prince Ronan's attire was immaculate as usual. Gold and crimson, his tunic flowed like the blood his father spilled for his throne. The shadows writhed beneath my skin. I didn't know the prince well and didn't need to. He couldn't be anything more than a replication of his father—a man of power, wielding it like a weapon over those whom he deemed less than him.

Twin sisters with rich brown skin in sage slips sat in the prince's lap. A man clothed in linen pants and an open vest stood behind him, running his broad hands along the prince's neck and over his shoulders. Prince Ronan stroked the sisters' arms in slow, lazy circles as he succumbed to the man's expert touch, leaning his head back into what was sure to be a firm torso—almost bored by what Lord Byrne had to say.

Did the prince know he listened to the words of a traitor? Perhaps he was sent here by his father to distract the lord while I gathered the evidence he needed. Or maybe he preferred to be surrounded by the lord's entertainment. Probably both.

Curiosity satiated, I moved to the study, following the map in my mind. Guilt weighed heavier with each footstep. Too often, I'd given over the names of innocent lives. Too often, my spirit withered away as the king used me against my people.

It was fruitless to outright rebel against the Conqueror King. If I had

any sense, I wouldn't risk his wrath at all. But every time I encountered the name of an osnádúrtha to be brought before him, my mother's name was the only one I saw.

The odious mark signifying our forced magical Bond burned at the nape of my neck as if trying to berate me for such thoughts. *Shush*, I sent back down the Bond. Thank the Nine and the Mother herself it wasn't a direct link to the king. He would have killed me long ago if he knew what lay amongst my thoughts. I turned the handle of the study.

Locked.

I stuffed my gloves into the pocket of my cloak and removed two sharp pins from the leather pouch attached to my waist. I guided the pins into the lock with practiced ease until a familiar *click* sounded.

I let loose a breath, slipped into the office, and locked the door. Adrenaline coursed through me like a tidal wave. No matter how many locks I've picked, it was always the same, giddy feeling.

Well-loved books lined the shelves to my left, and an unlit hearth sat on the opposite wall. A mahogany desk took center stage, the focal point of the room. I inhaled deeply. The comforting smell of parchment settled my nerves. I searched through the books first, looking for any false tomes and checking between them for anything the lord might want to conceal. A few of the titles were familiar—others too dull for a second glance. *The Art of Preservation: A Guide to Keeping Your Fruits and Vegetables*. Who would read such a thing?

The bookcase provided no clues, except that Lord Byrne might be too mundane to be a traitor. Nothing significant stood out on the desk as I shuffled through the papers scattered across it: business accounts, ledgers, and other monotonous documents. Its drawers were too shallow to house a false bottom. The unlit hearth on the far wall was barren aside from a lone cigar box and an empty decorative vase.

I ran my hands along the wall behind the oil painting above the hearth and the tapestry next to the door. Nothing. Two potted plants sitting on either side of the window were just that: plants. Not a single thing in the room screamed 'secret documents here.' I pinched the bridge of my nose. It was unlikely, but perhaps the chancellor's information was wrong.

Despite my frustrations, I prayed it was true.

Any hope of a misunderstanding came crashing down, however, when I crawled underneath the desk. The hollow knock of a false panel reverberated into my knuckles. I fumbled more than once to insert one of my pins into the small keyhole, letting loose a curse when it didn't budge.

The unmistakable crash of glass shattered in the distance. My hands stilled. One breath. Another. When I was sure footsteps weren't rushing up the stairs, I resumed my lock picking.

Gears ticked into place the further I pushed the pin. With one final *click*, the panel popped open. I snatched the files within it and moved to the window, letting the light of the full moon aid me as I scanned the handwritten papers—all of which contained information to condemn the poor lord.

Illustrations of *osnádúrtha* wanted by the crown. Ledgers of supplies. Accounts dedicated to getting the *osnádúrtha* out of Centra. Merrows, *faie*, and witches' names—either true or false—were scattered throughout the files.

I traced along the likeness of a merrow. She was in her true form—half human and half fish. Even on parchment, the artist captured the mesmerizing pull toward her. The following illustration was of a *faie*, the higher beings of the *aes sídhe*. They, too, resembled humans, but they were *more*. The male in the drawing was tall and lean. His hair was sheared short, showing off delicately pointed ears. Subtle, sharp, tapered ends of his upper canines poked out beneath his shy smile. I rubbed my tongue over my own and resisted the urge to touch my tipped ears. My fingers lingered over the word “*deceased*” written on the bottom of the page. I didn't know him or his character, but grief washed over me nonetheless. Did he have a family? Was he loved?

There were other drawings of the *osnádúrtha*—a few fair folk with wings or horns. Known as lesser beings of the *aes sídhe*, the fair folk all but disappeared from Centra since the Reckoning. My mother always made sure I understood that just because their smaller magic was often overlooked, it didn't make them any less. The king, however, didn't bother trying to Bond with them, deeming their magic as unimportant, and decided to rid the land of them instead. Those who survived hid within the land, waiting until they could make their escape.

I wasn't surprised to find there weren't any witches' portraits amongst the stack. It was odd for one to be caught outside of Ilythia, much less one willing to have their features recorded—they were known to be viciously private by nature. Probably why their kingdom still stood while others fell to their knees before Centra.

There were other pages filled with symbols I'd come to understand as some kind of code between the smugglers, listing people and places willing

to help magic wielders. I separated them from the main stack, making sure any information damning others was kept to the side.

I allowed the ledgers to stay; none of them indicated they were coming out of another's pocket. The portraits were harmless enough, as no names were attached. Reading the correspondence letters from those who escaped, thanking the lord for his help was like a punch to the gut. Shepherding the man to his death was a knife to the heart.

Lost in thought, I almost didn't notice the footsteps shuffling down the hall. I took what I needed to satisfy the Bond and shoved the rest of the incriminating papers back into the compartment, locking the panel. Guilt weighed heavily in my heart, leaving the portraits behind. They deserved so much more than what the king and his men would do to them once they raided Lord Byrne's estate. Burn them, likely.

I stuffed the information I would hand over to the king in my innermost pocket, taking care to put the coded letters in my boot. The Bond demanded I gather evidence against Lord Byrne, but the king didn't specify to bring him *everything* I found. These little technicalities were the only way I could work around his commands.

Lord Byrne was beyond saving with the king's target on his back. But I could keep the other smugglers safe...for now. I had to help them as much as I could. If the smugglers were safe, so were the osnádúrtha they aided.

A key jiggled the lock. There was no escaping now. Heart hammering, I squeezed between the side of the bookcase and the darkest part of the room. I called to the shadows, letting their darkness surround me until I became it.

I clutched the locket tucked under my cloak like a lifeline. It was the last reminder I had of her. The last thing my mother ever gave me. Holding it reassured her I was trying my best to look out for our people, like she would have done. My name, etched in silver, had worn over the years, but my thumb still stumbled over the letters *S-A-O-I-R-S-E*. The motion calmed my thunderous pulse.

Lord Byrne's heavy stride stomped across the room. Flint struck steel, and the warmth of the fire in the hearth was almost immediate. The surrounding shadows thickened to counteract the soft glow of flames.

A series of knocks rapped at the door in quick succession. The shadows along the wall depicted the lord greeting his guest with a firm clasp of arms. I resisted the urge to peer around the bookcase to look at his face, too afraid the shadows would fail against the light.

"I trust you were able to slip away unseen," Lord Byrne said.

“It was no trouble,” the man replied. His voice was somehow familiar, though I couldn’t quite place it. “Any word on the recent shipment?”

“They were delivered to the North successfully.” Arundell, I assumed if the shipment contained *osnádúrtha*. It was rumored my *faie* brethren in the North were offering refuge to all who could make it. Lord Byrne grabbed the cigar box on top of the hearth across from me, offering one to the man.

“Good,” the man sighed. “For a moment, I thought they weren’t going to make it.”

“If it weren’t for your help, they might not have.”

There was a pause in conversation, as if they both had come to the realization that they had almost lost everything they worked for. A lump formed in my throat. They weren’t out of the dragon’s den yet.

“Were you able to find out any more information about the attacks?” The man asked, changing the topic.

My ears perked up. Attacks? Certainly not within Rothcek. Something soured in my stomach; I prayed the king wasn’t sending more search parties for the *osnádúrtha*. Their presence was heavy soon after the Reckoning commenced, slowly dwindling once the *osnádúrtha* became more difficult to find, and the crown’s focus shifted to the smugglers instead.

“Unfortunately, no,” Lord Byrne said, his words mumbled. A match struck, its hiss sharp and quick. The gut-churning aroma of overworked leather and distant grassfire unfurled like a serpent, shoving its way down my windpipe until I could hardly breathe. “Only what you already know,” he continued, “I tried talking to the king, but I was dismissed.”

“I would assume as much. I haven’t been able to make any headway with him either,” the other man, presumably another noble, sighed. “I’ll have my scouts keep searching, but so far, we haven’t been able to find anything useful.”

“Do you think it’s him?” Lord Byrne asked, his voice barely a whisper.

“I don’t know why anyone would attack their own subjects, but it hasn’t stopped him before,” the man spat, his disdain heavy in the air, mingling with the smoke.

The door opened with a low creak. “Sir, I—” the butler cut himself off. “Your Highness, my apologies.”

The room spun, my world tilting with it. My eyes squeezed shut. Disbelief clung to me like a soggy shirt as Prince Ronan reassured the

apologetic butler. I should have recognized his voice, but the son of the Conqueror King colluding with a smuggler was the last thing I'd expected.

"No need for apologies. Thank you again, Lord Byrne, for sharing your imported cigars. Truly spectacular," Prince Ronan said before taking his leave, all of my assumptions about the man leaving with him.

The prince couldn't be working with the lord. It was a disguise—a way to gather evidence and dismantle the smuggling ring from within. There was, however, no denying the disgust the prince harbored in his voice when he referred to his father's actions.

Lord Byrne followed his butler out the door, leaving me to stew in the deafening silence amongst the smog of tobacco and shattered expectations. I paused at the threshold, fingers brushing against the door frame. I'd nearly forgotten about the coded letters burning a hole in my boot. If anyone found them, more than one life would be destroyed. They needed to disappear.

The codes were a weight in my hand, the power they held insurmountable. I watched them dwindle to ash in the smoldering hearth and vanished into the night.

CHAPTER TWO



Only a few servants, guards, and the Lord Chancellor of the Realm surrounded the king in his throne room. The chancellor was a stout man with a thick, ginger beard. The hair on his head conflicted with his facial hair—an exposed scalp peeked through thin streaks of strawberry-blonde. At first glance, his rosy cheeks might lead one to assume he was a kind man. The sinister light behind his bloodshot eyes suggested otherwise.

Those eyes skimmed my figure as I approached the throne placed upon a dais. Once. Twice. A third lingering glance made me thankful for my thick, unassuming cloak. I kept my gaze straight, repressing a shiver of disgust threatening to crawl down my spine. His attention almost made me forget the king seated on the throne.

Almost.

My footsteps echoed along the gray marble, passing pillars and shimmering curtains. The Conqueror King's dark leer narrowed as I approached. Hushed whispers from the chancellor slithered into his king's ear, but their gazes were trained on me like I was something to be watched and chaos could erupt at any moment. Despite his age, the king still appeared young. His hair was blacker than night save for a single white streak shooting across his temple—the only sign of his increasing years.

I bent into a strained bow as I've done many times in the last fifteen years, my eyes never straying from my mother's executioner. My captor.

My jailer. This was the man whose soldiers slaughtered my mother before abducting me. Yet, I kneeled before him.

Phantom touches from the hands of the guards who held me down as the king etched the Bond mark onto my neck ghosted my arms, my legs, my back. Flashes of what occurred in this room stole my vision. The soldier who kidnapped me wasted no time bringing me before his king with the spray of my mother's blood still staining his clothes. Did the paintings remember my screams? Aching and bleeding, I was forced to submit as the king forbade me from trying to end my life. Told me any attempt at escape was futile. The king's knee-length boots were polished to perfection today, as they were then, with not a speck of dust on them.

"Rise, Informer, and report," the king commanded, his voice deep and demanding. I did as he asked and kept my eyes on his too-clean boots. I was nothing more to him than my Bond. He would never say my name as I was not Saoirse, but only his Informer. Unfolding the paper from my pocket, I handed over the information that would sign Lord Byrne's death warrant.

"As the Lord Chancellor suspected, I found evidence to prove Lord Byrne a traitor."

The king examined the list. "This is it?"

"These are all the names Lord Byrne tried and failed to smuggle out of Centra, Your Majesty," I repeated, careful not to mention the coded letters. There were about fifty names on the list. Plenty to insinuate Lord Byrne a traitor and none other. It hinted that the lord, not an entire network of smugglers, was the one who orchestrated their failed escapes. I sent a prayer to the Mother. It needed to satisfy the king and prevent him from seeking more information.

The king stared at me for a long moment as if he could hear the thundering of my traitorous heart. "Is there any evidence he's working with others?"

"No, Your Majesty." Sweat beaded on my back as I pictured the pages filled with the codenames turning to ash in the flames. The Bond forced me to complete my mission, but it couldn't stop me from lying. My very nature as an *aes sídhe* prevented any lies from leaving my lips. However, this wasn't necessarily a lie. *Technically*, there wasn't any evidence of Lord Byrne colluding with others. Not anymore, at least.

If the king commanded me to report everything I found, however... I didn't want to think about what would happen. I hoped I had been obedient enough to earn a semblance of trust.

“Anything else you’d like to add?”

“I took only what I needed to avoid the lord’s suspicion. You’ll find other documents in the false panel under his desk if you conduct a search. There are ledgers and letters all indicating the lord is working alone.”

“My king, there should have been more,” the chancellor hissed. “My spies indicated he was colluding with others.”

“Informer?” The king asked.

It was an effort not to gulp, to shake, to flee. Instead, I steeled my shoulders and said, “If you were to conduct the search yourself, you would find nothing else, Your Majesty.” And because I couldn’t help myself, I added, “Unless of course, the chancellor is concerned how the lord preserves his fruit.”

My gaze stayed trained on the king, ignoring the chancellor’s leer. I shouldn’t have said that. Instead, I should have mentioned how the prince was conspiring with Lord Byrne. I didn’t trust the prince. However, if there was a chance he was helping the *osnádúrtha*, I couldn’t risk it. Not yet. Not until I knew for sure.

He’s testing you, a horrible thought nagged. Gods, was I an idiot? I swallowed, thinking of all the ways Prince Ronan could be spying for the chancellor or his father—scrutinizing my every move, seeing how much of a loyal pet I was.

I’m still in compliance with the Bond, I reassured myself. Whatever Prince Ronan was up to, I was still compliant with the king’s orders. It’s not my fault the king wasn’t specific with his commands.

Seemingly satisfied, the king didn’t question me further. I let out a breath. The chancellor took the list from the king’s outstretched hand and murmured in his ear—a cruel, cat-like smile stretched the corner of his thin lips. I knew I would regret my mouthiness. I always did. And yet, it didn’t matter. Not really. The chancellor demanded respect and longed to wield power like his king. He wielded his authority by punishing me as he saw fit. According to the chancellor, there was always a lesson to be learned—*be more punctual, stand straighter, breathe quieter*. Whether I controlled my temper or not, I was to be punished. Hard and often. The king never resisted, of course. My compliance with his commands was inconsequential. To them, I was a dog to be beaten into obedience. Periodically put in my place so there was never a question as to where I stood—a reminder I was nothing.

Regardless of the excuse, the chancellor always punished me for the same reason: existing. For being an *osnádúrtha*, an *aes sídhe*—*faie*. For

having magic and using it. My shadows were a part of me, as sure as the heart beating in my chest. Since the day they appeared, they've never left. Unlike other faie, my magic was a constant, visible presence, swimming under my skin like silk ribbons flowing in a gentle breeze. Like all faie, it was derived from the gods themselves. I prayed to them now, even though I knew they wouldn't listen. They hadn't in years.

"It seems you did not learn your last lesson in punctuality. The Lord Chancellor informed me you were late in delivering your report."

I wasn't.

"My apologies, Your Majesty," I acquiesced. Defending myself was futile and would only result in more lashes.

"You know what you must do."

I nodded and bowed at the dismissal. The faces of the guards who used to have to haul me away to the chancellor's office remained impassive as I followed the chancellor out of the throne room. With each step, I reminded myself there were others out there who kept other osnádúrtha from my fate. Humans were actively working to help my people, and because of me, because I burned those letters, they were still helping the osnádúrtha tonight and every night for as long as they could. The chancellor may punish me, but he couldn't touch the others, not if I could help it.

When we arrived at the chancellor's office, he didn't need to tell me to remove my cloak and shirt. Only in my thin undershirt, I kept my back to him as I laid the clothing over a chair quickly enough so he didn't think I was stalling and braced myself over the desk.

"And the undergarment."

I stilled. He usually let me keep my undershirt if the back was cut low. I cursed.

"Either you remove it, or I remove it for you," the chancellor said when I didn't comply.

My hands shook as I pulled the garment over my head. I kept my back to him and arms crossed over my breasts until I had no choice but to brace myself over his desk. It was humiliating to be bare before him. I tried to think of everything but my naked upper body and the lead cane he grabbed. It was his favorite, as minuscule pieces would break off into my wounds.

The desk was cold underneath my forearms, but it might have been my clammy skin. Gone were the usual trinkets and stacks of papers. Those had been pushed aside in preparation for our *lesson*.

Tuning out his vicious words, I took in the room's opulence—the ornate vases, gaudy tapestry, and other unnecessary finery. The Lord Chancellor benefited heavily when his king conquered most of the continent.

Without warning, a sharp, instantaneous slice of pain stung across my back at the first whack. My fingernails dug into the mahogany, adding to the menagerie of half-moon-shaped marks. The chancellor's words were muddled as if I was being held underwater. A second hit. This time to my right shoulder. My knees threatened to buckle underneath me, but I held as steady as I could. A third to my other shoulder. Another remark too muddled to make out. My arms trembled, struggling to hold myself up. If I collapsed, the chancellor would only hit me harder. My vision blurred, but I would not cry. Not anymore. I hadn't in nine years, not since I was fifteen. Instead, I drifted out of myself, leaving the world behind and focused on the tapestry in front of me.

Old and battered, the tapestry depicted an unfamiliar ancient battle. It clashed with everything else in the room. The colors were rich with deep reds, golds, and blacks. The woven threads called to me, depicting men clashing their swords with monstrous creatures from another world. I didn't know what they were and prayed I never would. Some resembled wolves or hounds, others of humans, but they were all wrapped in an ominous cloud of shadows, concealing most of their features. The piercing crimson eyes of the dark army's figurehead, insinuating death itself, were enough to fuel my nightmares. I favored the other half of the tapestry instead, where dragons scorched the monstrous figures and gods with ethereal beauty worked together to overpower the dark army.

My mother once told me a story about the bond between dragons and witches. Dragons were sacred to the witches. They protected one another because of it. What I wouldn't give to be a witch and for a dragon to protect me now. It was useless, though. I wasn't a witch, and the dragons were long dead.

By the time the chancellor delivered the final lash, I'd lost count. Blood trickled down my spine, a river of fire burning in its wake.

"We will see if you learn your lesson next time," the chancellor hissed. His scent of decayed roses clung to me like a recurring nightmare.

"Doubt it," I mumbled. The chancellor handed the cane to the guard and left without another word.

Sweat-drenched and blood-soaked, I forwent the cloak and tugged my shirt back over my head—trying not to wince as it passed over my battered

back. I paused, noticing a new map of Rúndaiaithe pinned to the wall. Different colored pinpoints scattered throughout the once five, now four kingdoms. Centra was awash with red flags, concentrated more heavily in Rothcek and the surrounding villages. The Barrens to the south, now waiving Centra's gold and crimson flag, were devoid of all pinpoints. Nothing lay amongst the sand and dust. The other kingdoms, however, held a singular black flag: Arundell, Sóngrahánn, Centra, and even the witch kingdom of Ilythia. Unsurprisingly, there wasn't much else in Ilythia—no pinpoints, city names, or even landmarks to distinguish the land.

It was difficult to decipher the map's meaning without an accompanying key. I was also too exhausted to care. The guard escorted me back to my room, and as much as I tried, I couldn't help the wobble of my knees as I trudged through the castle or the shake of my hand when I grasped the door handle.

Kalee, my handmaid and only friend, looked up from her book where she sat at the settee by my balcony window. Her chestnut hair was unbound—long, curly, and voluminous, nearly reaching her hips.

"Saoirse, I was wondering where you..." Her wide smile fell. Concern and something akin to pity swirled in her amber eyes. I looked away. Kalee rushed toward me and helped me to the attached bathing chamber. We replayed this scene often enough that she knew what to do.

My shirt stuck to the gashes and jutting bits of lead. Even Kalee's tender touch couldn't keep the burning at bay when she lifted my shirt overhead. Thanks to the magic running through my veins, the wounds themselves would heal fast as long as Kalee could pick all the lead out. Lead and iron were effective at counteracting magic, making it more difficult to heal. Oftentimes, the remaining shards of lead were too minuscule to get them all, leaving them to ooze and scar.

I sat there, silent in the warm water, while Kalee cleaned and dressed my wounds. With every inhale came a sharp sting, the pain more than physical. It traveled to my soul, festering like an unhealed wound—slow and creeping as it hollowed me out day by day. Something dark coiled inside me where happiness once stood. It waited patiently. Taking its time as it sought to steal every piece of me.

The weight of unshed tears lingered behind my eyes, but I still would not cry...not yet, not while Kalee was here. She couldn't see how badly the chancellor affected me, how weak and small he made me feel. How feeble and helpless I truly was.

She helped me dress, selecting a nightgown with a low back to avoid

disturbing the area. The cool, soft sheets of my bed provided a minor comfort as I lay on my stomach.

Like me, Kalee was parentless—her mother died during childbirth, and her father passed before I came to the castle. But whereas I was Bound to the king for the rest of my life, Kalee was human and could do as she pleased. Though the position her father secured for her in the castle was the best she would ever have, it was difficult not to be jealous of my friend at times like these—when she could walk away and leave this place behind. Meanwhile, I was stuck here. Forever.

I hid my face in the pillow.

“I love you, Saoirse,” Kalee whispered and kissed the top of my head. A gentle reminder that love could be found in this dark, odious place. That I was not alone. That she would stay if I asked. The offer was always there, but I couldn’t burden her. Kalee left, and the darkness inside me took yet another piece. Tears streamed down my face the instant the door shut. I sobbed, not because of the pain, but because of the state of my life. Because of the monster I was Bound to. Because of my mother, whom I disappointed in the Otherworld.

I cried because I was so dangerously close to breaking and no one—not even Kalee—would be able to put the pieces together again.